

**Characteristics, modifications and  
concerns:  
Ritual initiation among KwaBhaca males**

Submitted by

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### **Dedication**

This work is dedicated to the memory of my beloved Mother: Constance Nomabhaso Matshata and Grandmother: Minah Mkosi who contributed her life in seeing that my future is bright whose untimely demise left a void in my life.

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**Declaration**

I declare that this research project for the degree of Master of Arts at the University of Natal, Durban hereby submitted by me, has not previously been submitted by me for a degree at this or at another University, and that it is my own work in design and in execution and that all material contained herein is acknowledged.

**Christina Ngaloshe**

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### Abstract

This study investigates the distinguishing characteristics and the modifications to the traditional male initiation ritual as practised in KwaBhaca in the Eastern Cape. The concerns surrounding the incidence of death and maiming from related traditions is also investigated.

The study reveals that

- the male initiation ritual is still highly regarded in KwaBhaca;
- the male initiation ritual itself is still performed strictly traditionally in KwaBhaca;
- the male initiation ritual as practised in KwaBhaca has been successfully performed with minimal negative incident attributable to the performance of traditional circumcision;
- where there is incidence of a negative reaction, this is usually attributable to a prior health condition of the initiate, and in these circumstances, the initiate is referred to a medical doctor, on condition that the medical doctor is himself an initiate, and that the consultation will be conducted in a place deemed to be safe from spiritual contamination;
- incidences of maiming and death can be attributed to a number of causes, associated with poor practice and unacceptable conduct;
- boys who do not undergo circumcision in the traditional fashion are not regarded as men and remain boys in the eyes of the community. This means that they have to forego participation in important socio-spiritual ceremonies;
- there is a necessity to share the experience of the successful traditional circumcision process to avoid further misadventure, maiming and death;
- it is not the mechanics of the process of traditional circumcision that endangers lives, but the poor practice of the *iingcibi* (traditional surgeons) and other significant role-players including the initiates;
- The traditional teaching that accompanies the ritual of circumcision is as important, if not more important, than the ritual itself.

The study concludes with a series of recommendations aimed at rehabilitating and supporting the continuation of this important and venerated tradition.

## Introduction

In this research project I will investigate the identifying characteristics, modifications and concerns of KwaBhaca people in respect of traditional male initiation rituals to establish to what extent these are related to the successful traditional implementation of the male initiation ritual among KwaBhaca males.

Every society has a culture that distinguishes it from other cultures, and has identifying social patterns whose elements constantly recur to portray its life customs to which it clings and which it honours. Traditional customs are constantly being challenged by modification arising out of contact and interactions with other cultures and progressive technological trends. Tyrrell identifies this challenge as follows:

The heritage of the Black people of Southern Africa is a rich and enormously varied one, deep rooted in the soil of the past but still a vital force in the present. Almost unaltered in rural areas, it is, however, undergoing rapid change in the cities in reaction to contact with Western cultures and is fast disappearing (1983:bookflap).

According to Brooster

the fabric of life of a society is influenced by the history of the tribe, the shape of the landscape, the colour of the sky, the sun and rain. What we are today, forms our thoughts of yesterday and our present thoughts build our life of tomorrow (1976: 109)

And as much as four decades ago, the African sage Amadou Hampaté Bâ signalled the need to prioritise a preferred way forward:

At the moment when Africa has regained her independence, at the moment when Africa is in search of itself, African leaders should avail themselves of the traditions if they want to create or recreate an African Africa; if not, they will make an Africa that is nothing but a caricature of Europe. With the sources which have not yet dried up, great provision can be made.

It is my thesis that we need to heed the warning of Tyrell, the evaluation of Broster and the guidance provided by Amadou Hampaté Bâ and look to the traditions of the past in carving a way forward. Therefore it is most urgent that oral tradition and testimony be recorded, preserved and studied. As a means of re-evaluating socio-cultural values, Oral Studies have a major role to play in dual oral-literate societies, as for example in South Africa. One such example is that of adult male initiation rituals.

### **Aim of the study**

This research project aims to investigate the identifying characteristics, modifications and concerns of the KwaBhaca people in respect of this traditional ritual to establish to what extent these are related to the successful traditional implementation of the male initiation ritual among the amaBhaca. This study will not address all and other amaXhosa male initiation rituals.

While much has been written on KwaXhosa male initiation rituals with some writers such as Hammond-Tooke (1962:7) stressing that such rituals came to an end during Shaka's reign, the male initiation rituals practiced in KwaBhaca have never been documented. This study has been undertaken in part to fill this gap in research on KwaBhaca male initiation rituals.



### Concerns surrounding male initiation rituals in South Africa

Male initiation rituals, including circumcision in the South Eastern regions of South Africa, are centuries old. In recent times, there has been an alarming increase in the incidence of death and maiming related to the adult male circumcision ritual in the South Eastern regions of South Africa. Many advocate the abandonment of the traditional mode of circumcision in favour of a surgical procedure conducted in hospital. While this might deal adequately with the physical requirement of the ritual, the social and psychological affects of the ritual procedure cannot be met by the hospital intervention. Advocates of the traditional male initiation ritual point out that the ritual has much to do with the 'coming of age' of the young men. Without the performance of the ritual in the traditional way, the young men will never achieve the status of 'men' and will forever remain 'boys' in societal life.

The importance of the ritual is closely tied into the procedures and behaviours which are intrinsic to the *raison d'être* of the ritual. KwaBhaca society's culture, which has been a part of their life-forms, such as the *umkhosi wokweshwama* (first fruit celebration festival), has become a thing of the past due to acculturation. Acculturation is a process wherein exchange of cultural traits between two societies living in continuous first hand contact produces a hybrid having elements of both represented in various proportions. AmaBhaca as wanderers and homeless people were scattered over a vast area in search of their own land and came into contact with other societies whose cultures dominated theirs so that they lost their identity, resulting in their adopting Xhosa as a *lingua franca*, and marginalising their own *thsefula* dialect. (Hammond-Tooke 1962:318). This *thsefula* dialect has remained undocumented, with two distinguishable outcomes. In those areas where the young generations are schooled in Zulu or Xhosa or English, the *thsefula* dialect has fallen into disuse, resulting in a breakdown of inter-generational communication and a loss of Bhaca identity. In those areas where the

*thsefula* dialect has a strong influence and is the mother tongue of the young, they cannot cope with the languages of learning at school - Xhosa or Zulu – and often leave school at Grade 4. They do not benefit from the school-based education and remain essentially users of the oral mode of learning, recording and communication.

Despite the loss of culture due to continuous fights and wandering, amaBhaca have continued to practice the male initiation ritual, with some modification. The contact of the amaBhaca with amaHlubi saw the revival of the ritual with elements of both societies merging into it.

In being circumcised, the initiate has symbolically shed a part of himself and parted with the mother image. He is no longer a complete and self-sufficient being, but now definitely requires membership in society and union with a woman to attain wholeness (Tyrrell 1983: 123). The status of manhood is highly valued. It is significant that the youth in the rural areas show a keen interest in the male initiation ritual, whereas in the cities the youth question its importance.

### **The current dilemma facing the issue of male initiation ritual in South Africa**

The desire to preserve its culture is a society's concern in the midst of all the other problems that it encounters. In essence, the fulfillment of life's ambitions and dreams finds constant contradictions in its path but these are necessary for the sake of its advancement. People who are concerned to see the continuity of the male initiation ritual in the face of changing conditions forced on them by circumstances beyond their control, are people who understand the need for continuity as a means of identity.

An organisation, which is not engaged in an active process of change, is in a state of equilibrium. This state of equilibrium is brought about by the fact that the driving forces that are forces of change are balanced by the restraining forces - the forces that are acting against change (Lewin 1951). A significant driving force for change is the pandemic of HIV/Aids. With the incidence of HIV/Aids increasing daily, changes in the routine procedures used traditionally in the male initiation ritual, are necessary in one way or other to ensure the safety of the initiates. The immediate response is to use the hospital option, but it is clear that this is not in and of itself a solution to the problem, because the hospital option does not provide the traditioned teaching that accompanies the ritual: such an initiate can never be regarded as a man because he has not experienced the ritual in its traditional form. The traditional ritual involves ancestor worship and spirits and the ceremonies are held in the cattle kraal as well the *inkundla* (the area that lies between the hut and the kraal). But because of the instances of death and maiming among the young men who participate in the ritual, the traditional practice as a whole is threatened. Consequently, the traditional mode, status and perception of manhood within the relevant group is threatened, which in turn threatens the identity and cohesion of the group as a whole.

### **Hypothesis**

When the rituals of minority groups are successful, they should be noted and copied, regardless of the status of the groups, and not regarded as a failure simply because they have a limited number of adherents. They should reflect upon what constitutes a success or a failure. With these minority groups' rituals being unearthed, those societies missing valuable information and successes enjoyed by these groups, now have the opportunity to perform the ritual more or less in the same way with little or no difference compared with their history.

KwaBhaca male initiation rituals have tended to have positive results, with little or no loss of life or limb arising out of infection as a result of poor medical and sanitary practices during the performance of the traditional circumcision. To date, these positive outcomes have been insufficiently promoted. This study undertakes to provide information about KwaBhaca male initiation rituals as a possible solution to the current problems surrounding male initiation rituals outside of the KwaBhaca tradition. It is hoped that this study, which emphasizes traditional good practice in KwaBhaca, will point the way to resolving the current crisis to some degree.

We need to be aware of how our culture can be promoted and marketed. We need to be aware of what we have in culture and how it can be turned to a positive end: Appropriate rites of passage, which emphasizes the irreversible nature of the changes associated with maturation phases in life consisted in birth, naming, coming of age, marriage and death, must be highlighted.

It is in the context of all of the above that his study focuses on the status of the male initiation ritual as practiced in KwaBhaca.

## Chapter 1

### The Historical Background Of KwaBhaca

#### 1.1. Origin

The name *Bhaca* comes from a Zulu word meaning to “hide oneself, to take shelter” (Hammond-Tooke 1962:7). The amaBhaca are the descendents of those tribes who were forced to flee from Natal during the chaotic period of Zulu history subsequent to Shaka’s rise to power.

They are very conscious of their Zulu origin and have their headquarters at Lugangeni. Bhaca people are proud of their unique *thsefula* dialect (reminiscent of Swati, thereby posing problems of ultimate origin) and above all, of their common descent from the great cultural hero Madzikane (Hammond-Tooke 1962:1).

The story of the Bhacas’ fall naturally into three great episodes namely ‘The Origin’, ‘The Flight’, and ‘A Period of Wandering’ as a homeless tribe, and their final settlement in the area now called Mount Frere.

The amaBhaca originated from the Northern Natal and are today divided into two autonomous tribes, one under the leadership of the descendent of chief Nomtsheketshe found in the valley of Mvenyane River. The rest are under the late chief Wabana Makaula. There are other independent sections of amaBhaca who occupied the area of uMzimkhulu, Ixopo and Bulwer districts of Natal. (see APPENDIX B)

## 1.2 The Period Of Wandering

After crossing the Tugela River, Madzikane and his people occupied the area called Msongonyathi where they planted crops and reared cattle. It is on this land that Madzikane made his will to his *induna* (headman), Jekwa, which read thus:

*Ke niyakuthi ndakuyikhaba idyasi niyekufaka iintloko phantsi kweempiko zikaFaku kuba ndirogole itmbombo zonke zomhlaba ndafumana kunuka uxolo lodwa kwelamaMpondo ngaphandle kokuba nakuthi nisuke niwunyole umbuso (Makaula 1966: 11).*

(Translation: When I die you will have to take refuge under chief Faku of Pondoland where peace prevails for I have searched all the corners and found Pondoland as the only peaceful area unless you people will provoke them.)

Madzikane was the keeper of the sacred tribal medicine and was, in his own right, a herbalist of repute. He called his people together and promised to counter the Zulu attack single-handed by means of his charms (Hammond-Tooke 1962:5). After being attacked by the Zulus he moved up the Nunge Mountain. Shaka's army followed him as they feared to return empty-handed. Using his magic charms, Madzikane killed a great number of Zulu's by means of snow. The snow fell on the side occupied by Zulu *impis* (warriors) while Madzikane's people were free from it. This marked the end of the attack by Shaka's army. Madzikane continued wandering with his people in search of a land where they would be able to live peacefully. On the way, they fought many battles, some of which they won, while others they lost. Madzikane died in the battle at Gqutyini forest at a place today called Engcobo.

Madzikane's people continued to wander, in accordance with his will. They went as far as Pondoland and spread themselves in the vast area across from the Umzimvubu River. After

some time, it became clear that no two chiefs could rule in one area so the amaBhaca continued on their way until they finally settled in the area today known as Mount Frere.

Mount Frere is situated in the mountainous plateau country of East Griqualand, one of the constituent areas of the (ex)Transkeian territory, which stretches from the borders of Pondoland to the mountain wall of the Drakensberg (Hammond-Tooke 1962:7).

The land is carved by three main rivers namely the Thina, Kinira and Umzimvubu into a deep valley clothed in euphorbia and aloe. On their way, the amaBhaca met Bushmen who contributed to the secret language of the male ritual initiates which is even today peculiar to them, is used in the *iphempe* (lodge) and only in the midst of other initiates. One group settled in the area called eLutateni. Those amaBhaca who fell under the rule of Makaula occupied Mpendle, Tshungwana, Lubhacweni, Dangwana, Shushu etc. with eLugangeni being their headquarters. According to Nkabinde (1988:269), “colonisation resulted in social disorganisation, a change in life-style of the people and the attrition of the arts and creative composition.”

The period of wandering ended with eventual colonisation of their present territory as demarcated by the colonial administration in 1875. By coming into contact with other tribes, they gradually lost the *thsefula* dialect, so that today Xhosa is the main language spoken. In the south-west of the area Zizi, Mpondomise, Xesibe and Hlubi are found but apart from these societies, the area is occupied exclusively by Bhacas.

### 1.3 Traditions

It is Nkabinde's (1988) view that an important characteristic of oral tradition is that most of it transcends the cultural experience of the culture in which it occurs and is applicable to human

experience in general. As amaBhaca began to settle they were able to practice their culture, because they had found land for the performance of cultural rituals. Both boys and girls undergo initiation in a way peculiar to amaBhaca. Makaula (1966:60) maintained that initiation came to an end among amaBhaca as a result of wars, which were common.

When a boy reached adulthood, he would wake up and drive both his neighbours' and his father's cattle to the veld. When men noticed this, they followed him and brought him home. His grandmother would cook *amabele* porridge for him as no-one who was the mother of a child (as distinct from an adult) could participate in the ritual. The boy had to eat the hot porridge with his hand. In this way, he was accustomed to hardship. His father would remove all the hairs from his body and throw them away. This signified that his past had been 'thrown away', along with all that was in his past, and the boy had started a new life. A celebration on behalf of the boy was held with people drinking traditional beer and chanting songs.

In traditional amaBhaca society, both boys and girls had to undergo initiation. Thus they were transformed from child-status into adulthood. Girls had to be secluded for a month in a hut where a lot of grass was spread on the floor. No male was allowed to speak to them at the time until the ritual had been completed. The young woman publicised her virginity the day after her marriage by presenting a bloodstained sheet as evidence of her virginity, while ululating loudly.

Sexual purity was also required from males. This was maintained by abstaining from sexual relations, and therefore the chances of contracting sexually transmitted diseases were limited. This custom also has, sadly, become a thing of the past, thus pregnancy is common today as early as approximately twelve years of age.



Bhacas celebrate *ingcubhe*, (the ritual of the sacred fruit), which Hammond-Tooke (1962) equates with the Swazi *incwaba* but the difference lies in the times of celebration with Bhacas having theirs in March while Swazis use the month of December. The elaborate ceremonial of *ingcubhe* (the ritual of the sacred fruit) and “the appeasement of the spirits of the tribal ancestors by sacrifice and supplication” (Hammond-Tooke 1962:10), celebrated the ripening of the crops. A kraal was built where the chief and his people spent the nights. Women wore tanned goat skins for *ingcubhe*. Men traveled long distances in search of the head of a brave man without protrusions at the back - *lingena gantsho*. This head was required by the chief to serve as his washbasin, and in which he prepared herbs for the warriors. The head was used by the chief throughout his chieftainship. At each *ingcubhe* following, the chief used the same head.. A bull was sacrificed on this day. Men had to overpower it and throw it on its side without using a rope and remove the whole limb while the bull was still alive. They left the bull to stand on three legs. They also pulled the fruit, together with its roots, from the land of other groups: this was called *ukweshama*. Today the place is called KwaBhaca as there are many other societies who have joined them in the area. To commemorate the great chief of the time who founded amaBhaca society, chief Madzikane’s bones were reburied at the Agricultural Showground in Mount Frere, thus strengthening the Zulu chieftainship in the Eastern Cape of the time.

We still find the descendents of Diko, Bhekuzulu, Makaula and Ncaphai as rulers (see APPENDIX B). These are areas where the *thsefula* dialect still exists, even though it is dominated by Xhosa. The ritual initiation of boys has continued to exist although influence of the neighbouring tribes such as amaHlubi can be noted. Some of KwaBhaca boys who went to Fort Hare uninitiated, returned home as initiates as they could not bear being called *iindzevu* (uncircumcised males). KwaBhaca boys are attracted to Hlubi *amaphempe* (lodges) which

occupy the borders of the Thina river. They have inherited this custom from amaHlubi KaLudidi (Bhungani). These chiefs of ama-Hlubi like Mafu, his son Mashwabanda who became a chief after his father's death, were the first chiefs in the area who originated from Herschel.

Other people who contributed to the male initiation ritual of KwaBhaca society were the Bushmen. Initiation ritual among the KwaBhaca society is common. Every year a number of boys attend the initiation school. Manhood is highly valued as it proclaims their identity and it is the only ritual that has survived the pressures of Western culture.

## Chapter Two

### Literature Review

In this chapter, I report on the incidence of male initiation rituals globally, and identify its theoretical underpinnings in terms of selected studies dealing with the topic.

#### **2.1 Literature revealing the global incidence of male initiation rituals**

The initiation of boys is an aspect of culture which features all over the world in societal life both in the past and present centuries. It took place in Biblical times when Abraham was circumcised at the age of ninety-nine years in obedience to God's Covenant (Genesis 17.9).

Circumcision is practiced by many societies in the world including the Indo-Americans, the indigenous peoples of Sub-Saharan and West Africa, the Australian aborigines, and so on.

- Among Jews, Muslims and Christians as well as in various traditional societies all over the world the operation is regarded as having the profoundest religious significance (Funani 1990:21).
- The Turkana of East Africa circumcise the boys whose entrance into a group of initiates is determined by a particular set of rules (Ichieka 1995). Such candidates perform tasks demanding personal strength, skills and accuracy. The initiate has to be able to spear an animal to death. Readiness for initiation therefore in this society is determined on the basis of strength, skill and accuracy.
- The main goal of initiation in New Guinea is to make boys big and strong, to make them aggressive warriors (Herdt 1987:101). This requires the removal of the boys by force if necessary from the women's domain. The boys must then conform to rigid roles. For this tribe, warfare is a number one reality to be reckoned with.

- The Rendille according to Paris (1994) circumcised young men from sixteen to twenty years of age. There should be six or more boys for a circumcision ritual to take place.
- The Lemba, in a part of Venda and Northern Sotho, practice circumcision and avoided pork and animals which have not been ritually killed and bled. They consider the circumcision rite a major event in a man's life (West and Morris 1984).
- Initiation in Zambia represents a message and thriving (Herdt 1987). They use initiation rite to recruit and train males.
- According to Soko (1988:146), Jando boys are initiated intellectually and physically in a quasi-religious way.
- Xhosa initiation is seen as the formal incorporation of males into Xhosa religious and tribal life (Funani 1990:X). Initiation is coupled up with the handing over of arms, and admonition lessons dwell on the duties of a tribesman to his chief and tribe (Mayer 1991).

All societies discussed here share a common view of initiation as an endurance test. It does not matter how they differ in the developmental stages of the ritual but what manhood entails to them and to the society is instilled in the youth, as well as the ability to endure hardship.

## **2.2 Literature revealing the theoretical underpinnings of the practice of male initiation rituals**

The identifying characteristics, concerns and modifications in respect of the traditional KwaBhaca ritual initiation of males has been insufficiently documented as the society itself has become absorbed in other cultures with some of its customs fading and disappearing. To understand KwaBhaca male initiation ritual, one should study the assumptions, thoughts and meanings, feelings, beliefs, customs and actions of the people who practice it.

It must be remembered that a custom such as the male initiation ritual has a social purpose that contributes to the identity and health of the group as a whole. This process is a 'traditioned' process (as opposed to a 'schooled' process), in which the values and belief systems, the norms and expectations of adult behaviour are passed on from generation to generation. The theoretical underpinnings must therefore account

- for the way in which the ritual 'traditions' norms, values and belief systems are expressed;
- for the way in which the ritual establishes identity, both at the level of the group and of the individual concerned;
- for the connection between the identity of the group as a whole and the sense of being of each individual within the group.

As these purposes are frequently addressed simultaneously, the review of literature will be dealt with eclectically.

Jousse (1990) identifies the indivisibility of the being of a person – of a man – and the indivisibility of the man and his origins as they live within him and are his life forms. From this indivisibility his experiences derive meaning, dignity, unity and balance. This is apparent in the ceremonies of this nature where literate society joins forces with the oral, dress themselves in traditional dress, ululating with jubilation as the initiated men join the society. All the speeches, the songs and praise poems of the day result in oneness, a reminder of the past bringing balance.

Jousse (1990) accounts for 'traditioning' as follows. Jousse identifies the process of impression and expression as that central to the business of communication, learning and memory. What is 'impressed' leaves its 'impression' behind even when it is 'expressed' in

communication. These 'impressions' constitute 'learning' and 'memory'. Effective impression is dependent upon the mode of expression. Jousse identifies the importance of gestures, facial expression, vocal tone and expression of meaning in live performance as self-informing and self-reinforcing features of identity. Involved in the performance of this ritual is the admonishing of the initiates by adults who use all of facial, vocal tone and gestures in impressing into them the importance of ensuring that the ritual is kept sacred at all costs. The reciting of praise poems and the singing of songs involve clapping of hands dancing, and ululating of women. It evokes the spirits and unites the society. Everyone witnesses the 'birth' of 'men' in the society, an event conducted in a particular order to make it an important event in the lives of the newly initiated. Rhythm and balance are part of the live performance, and aid the 'impressing' of the tradition .

Nkabinde (1988) is of the view that an important characteristic of oral tradition is that most of it transcends cultural experience in general. In this dissertation this form of experience features in the practice of the ritual as relived in communal participation displaying those characteristics peculiar to KwaBhaca society such as beating of the calabash, singing, calling 'May, June months' to come etc.

Mackenzie (1988) believes that the chief function of oral performance, apart from its entertainment value, is its power to educate and transmit the values, traditional wisdom and norms of the society which proclaim its identity, from generations to generation – what I refer to as 'traditioning'. Traditions are impressed in the youth thus handing them down from generation to generation through live performance so that the values, norms and wisdom by which their forefathers live is expressed in their lives. This educative part of the ritual helps

the individual to understand who he is, where he comes from and where he is heading to – **his** identity, thus providing answers to what constitutes a society – **its** identity.

Finnegan (1992) sees oral performance as one specific mode of human communication and action. She distinguishes it from normal or everyday activity. She further examines the link between the 'Performer – Performance – Audience' and positively values these links as organised, deeply felt and thoughtful expressions of personal and social identity. In ritual ceremonies where people gather in solidarity for the occasion, they actively participate in the development of the oral style construction. This togetherness will be observed.

Herd (1987) holds the view that secrecy provides symbolic ways of roping off childhood experiences and keep adult males separate from adult females. In this dissertation, these secrets and their function are highlighted in relation to those relationships in which the adult-to-be has, for the greater part of his life, been involved. These secrets play an important role in his advancing towards being self-dependent. These secrets will be dealt with as they unfold his future life as a man: in the rite of separation and seclusion which culminates in ritual washing making for his incorporation into the new world i.e. 'manhood'. Secrets also contribute to keeping the ritual sacred, protecting the tradition.

Moore and Myerhoff (1997:3) confirm that in anthropology the study of ceremony and ritual has been restricted largely to consideration of religious and magical procedures. This is no doubt partly because anthropologists have so often dealt with societies in which all of the daily lives of those studied are imbued with what is sacred, and in which the unseen spirit world is constantly present and continuously intervening in the visible world.

This study will take cognizance of both of these two worlds – that of the unseen spirit world and that of the visible physical world - as they both feature in the performance of the ritual, and are imbedded in the beliefs and customs of KwaBhaca male initiation ritual.

Van Gennep (in Gitywa 1976:28) sees the sacred and profane as a central concept for understanding the traditional stage in which man finds himself. The transitional stages which are vital in the transformation and incorporation of an individual into the group are dealt with here.

According to Margaret Mead (1959:1107) the majority of initiation tests take the form of a school - with varying degrees of physical endurance tests, instruction in traditional hygiene and sex life, and correct conduct towards to senior people, with an intense emphasis on submission to authority. Initiates are admonished by old men to observe and adhere strictly to the rules.

Funani (1990) discusses the practice of circumcision under conditions dictated by the demands of the white man's culture which has given rise to unfortunate consequences. These unfortunate consequences in the performance of the circumcision will be used to compare and contrast the performance of the ritual among KwaBhaca society and others, thereby highlighting what contributes to the success of the traditional ritual without initiates being hospitalised or confronted with high fatalities. Noganta (1999), moved by the continual fatalities due to the performance of the ritual, voiced out his concern that "the customary cut be made safer". This study will look into the cause of the fatalities by examining the ways in which the ritual is performed from its inception, as it unfolds, and up to its end, pinpointing



areas of concern to be attended to in an effort to eliminate them. The safety of the initiates is the focal point of this study.

Mayer (1971:15) speaks of failed initiation in terms of the “theory of criminality”. Initiation is meant to change boys, who are intrinsically wild, into responsible men. This study will look at the deviant behaviours experienced from initiated men, and how these are dealt with among KwaBhaca males to make the ritual not only safer but also more effective in its main aim of ensuring responsible behaviour in adulthood.

Mbiti (1969:216) points out that a “new and rapid rhythm is beating from the drums of science and technology, modern communication and mass media, schools and universities, cities and towns for African youth”. These new identities threaten the traditional societal life resulting in some of the traditions being discarded. Be that as it may, a society without a culture does not exist. The forces of change cannot be rejected even though they are threatening the societal life: in a single family we can find parents who are essentially ‘traditioned’ and ‘oral’ and their children who are schooled and literate - surely two worlds existing under the same roof with one threatening the other. In these situations, it becomes necessary to change the ‘form’ of the ritual but not the ‘ritual’ itself to accommodate the needs of the different members of such a family group. It is essential that the present generation should be accommodated so that they can identify with the ritual, find meaning in it and be proud of being African.

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

Qualitative methods of observation and interviewing sources so as to gather information were used in this study of the characteristics, modifications and concerns in KwaBhaca male initiation ritual.

#### 3.1 Data Collection

The study was designed to gather information by observation and from interviews with those people who have been and are involved in the performance of the ritual such as the *ingcibi* (traditional surgeon), *amakhankatha* (guardians), *ixhwele* (traditional healer) and an *ikrwala* (newly initiated man), a medical doctor and some of the members of the community who held different views on the continuity of the ritual. Those key sources would be required to relive their experiences as to:-

- i. what contributes to the success of KwaBhaca initiation ritual?
- ii. what they believe to be the cause of the flaws surrounding the ritual which seem to threaten the identity and cohesion of the group?
- iii. the identity of the current modifications to the ritual, and the source of these modifications;
- iv. what effect the modifications are having in respect of the sacredness of the ritual: does the ritual continue to be sacred even though there are changes in the form of the ritual? Does change to the form change the ritual itself?

#### 3.1 Types of Sources

Research sources consisted of **primary** sources – the sources and ‘sources-by-proxy’ – and **secondary** sources - local and international publications, unpublished documents, journals,

conference papers and theses. A computer search was undertaken with the aid of a search analyst to track the research cited on the topic. The research analyst was given key terms/synonyms such as 'initiation', 'rituals', 'circumcision'. A print-out was obtained and a selection of pertinent sections were read for information and further sources, which were then followed up. Index cards were used to record the bibliographic citations and this was arranged chronologically. File cards were used to record single items of information or single quotations giving the date and a page number for future reference. A brief analysis of each source relevant to the problem was written on note-cards using phrases, abbreviations and quotation marks with page numbers. A comparative analysis of the relevant sources was done so as to reveal the similarities and differences in the characteristics and modifications in KwaBhaca ritual initiation and other societies dealt with in these sources. By presenting an analysis of the initiation ritual among KwaBhaca males, it is hoped that the study will help us to understand the practice of those people committed to ensuring the safety of the initiated youth.

The sources were compared and contrasted as to the way that they contributed, or failed to contribute to knowledge of the following:

- i. the characteristics of KwaBhaca male initiation ritual which distinguish it from the way it is performed in other societies.
- ii. how to redress the sources of contention which they believe have lead to the crisis in the ritual initiation of boys.
- iii. the need to implement drastic changes in the performance of the ritual to accommodate changes in society, without the significance of the ritual itself being changed.

These points were considered at every interview to evaluate the data which had been collected.

### 3.2 Selection of sources and sources-by-proxy

Sources were identified using the snowball technique of sampling. The process was started by identifying individuals knowledgeable about the topic with the help of Menelisi who resides at Elubhacweni location where I decided to collect the data. Thereafter, each successive participant or group was named by a preceding individual or group. In making final decisions, I had to consider accessibility of the individuals and feasibility in terms of time constraints.

As knowledge of the intimate details of the male initiation tradition is taboo to women, I employed the services of Menelisi Mkosi to conduct the interviews on my behalf. He interviewed the 'traditioned' oral people to gather information. The information he collected was recorded in writing.

In addition, Menelisi assembled a group of his friends who had already been initiated, and who now help those in charge in the *iphempe* (lodge) during the circumcision period. Each of them was assigned a duty to collect information from each participant in the *iphempe* (lodge), namely a traditional *ingcibi* (traditional surgeon), a traditional healer, the guardians and the *USosuthu* (host). These students then narrated what they had collected from these elders to me. In this way, I was able to interview 'by proxy'. What I report here is the experience of my interviews with those who reported their experience of the interviews with the original sources to me – a process of oral traditioning within the ambit of academic enquiry, used to accommodate the restrictions of a taboo. I refer to my sources as 'sources-by-proxy'.

### 3.3 The interview schedule

The interviews were scheduled for the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 7<sup>th</sup> July 1999 from 10h00 to 10h30 each day at Elubhacweni location in Mount Frere. A second visit to Mount Frere was made in August.

Further interviews were conducted in Port Shepstone. These interviews were all conducted in Xhosa, a common language in the group so as to reduce any inhibitions which might be due to racial differences.

### **3.4 The conducting and recording of the interviews**

The interviews with the 'sources-by-proxy' were recorded by means of a tape recorder. As each source-by-proxy narrated his story, I made notes about his body language and vocal expression - the pitch of the voice, the pace of their speech and the variation of vocal colour and tone. While some became extremely animated and excited as they relived their experiences which served to remind them of the events of the past, they were also not at ease with the tape-recording. One can hear this on the tape. At times, the tape had to be stopped and rewound to correct slips of the tongue. Having recorded the information on the tape-recorder, I then had to record it on paper. This written record was then confirmed, checked and cross-checked with the source-by-proxy to ensure its validity.

On the sixth day of the first visit to Mount Frere, some of the old men agreed to be interviewed by Menelisi, but refused to do so in the presence of a tape-recorder. They provided valuable information about the characteristics of the ritual in the past, as well as its present performance and its modifications. They voiced their concerns about the performance of their valued tradition by the youth and the people in charge of the ritual. They were concerned about their identity.

I was permitted to interview two men who had been initiated. They provided information with regard to the characteristics of the ritual in the past and in the present eras. They were able to pinpoint the sources of mishaps in the present, and they also accounted for social changes in

life generally, and suggested what could contribute to the successful performance of the ritual. In Port Shepstone, I had no problem in interviewing two gentlemen, as well as the medical doctor.

In August, I revisited the Mount Frere area and I was surprised to learn of a number of sources who were convinced that secrets should not be revealed and recorded. These men were all middle-aged or elderly. They asked me why I had chosen a topic such as this, but they would not tell me some of the secrets involved in the tradition.

I came to the conclusion that people living in a predominantly 'oral' society feel inhibited in the presence of literate people, but when face-to-face with someone with whom they can identify as 'one of their own' – viz. an 'oral' person, - happiness and eagerness to participate can be detected in their facial expressions and gestures. Reliving their past experiences brought joy to the men who informed this study as it served as an affirmation of identity and worth: the world of men is important in their lives.

### **3.5 Analysis and synthesis of data**

Having collected the information it was analysed, compared and contrasted with that from the literature sources so as to focus the study. The chunks and pieces of data were assembled fitting them together so that they were a coherent whole. A summary of what had been discovered was recorded in writing, noting the major events and issues discovered in the course of the interviews. Such summary provided a basic story and informed the reader about.

- i. who was studied?;
- ii. where the study took place?; and
- iii. how it was conducted?

The data was analysed to provide an understanding of the initiation ritual of males from the participants' perspectives, and their view of social relations. The information was then 'tidied' and synthesized to provide an understanding of the events that may or may not have been directly observed. The success or otherwise of the goal of the ritual was taken into consideration: was the goal met or not?

### **3.6 The views of the sources and 'sources-by-proxy'**

Both the sources and the 'sources-by-proxy' support the continuity of the male initiation ritual. They felt that every society has a tradition and culture which distinguishes it from other societies, and that the male initiation ritual is one distinguishing feature of the amaBhaca culture and tradition. They felt that tradition and culture are educative, and bring about togetherness and solidarity in the group. They felt that the male initiation ritual impresses upon the initiates the following social norms and values of amaBhaca:

- a man belongs not to his family alone, but to the community as a whole which he has to serve throughout his life.
- the male initiation ritual separates 'boys' from 'men'.
- a man is admonished on the way that he has to behave in the midst of the society: he is expected to respect other people's property and to look after the community.

They further supported the maintenance of the male initiation ritual because:

- the tradition remains a reminder about 'roots' and contact with the ancestors.
- it is educative and moulds the conduct of an individual.
- the initiate is transformed by a rite and incorporated into a group. He obtains a new name which happens only once in his life time but re-plays in his mind throughout his life.
- past traditions could succeed in improving solidarity within the group.

- the ritual aids the capacity to identify with fellow-humans.
- The ritual has a religious significance as witnessed in *umngcamo* (feast for the initiates before they go to the mountain), *umojiso* (feast given to initiates seven days after initiation) ritual and the *umphumo* (welcoming feast given to the initiates when they return home from the mountain) ceremony resulting in the commitment of some kind through manipulation of symbols and sensory stimuli.

In respect of the above, Gitywa (1976:65) states that enculturation of the individual in the early years of his life is the prime mechanism in the making of cultural stability, while the process, operating at a more mature level is highly important in inducing change: the growing child is posed between the pull of the two positions, the traditional solidarity which supplies him with land, customs, ethics, rites of passage, customary law, religious participation and a historical depth, and a modern way of life which for him has not yet acquired any solidarity (Mbiti, 1962:219). It is through the process of the tradition 'impressing' in him that he in turn 'expresses' that he acquires it as a personal tradition which contributes to his identity and the identification with the group.

Current changes occurring in our societies have an impact on the performance of the oral tradition: competing claims for identity by those factors outside the oral traditions are raised in the course of this study.

### **3.7 Personal Difficulties in the Field**

I found this an extremely tough personal assignment principally because the amaBhaca male initiation ritual is surrounded by secrecy, taboos and avoidance practice which threatened to disallow me as the researcher to penetrate to the core of the matter. As explained above, the



problem of close contact with the sources was solved by a number of initiated students who have enjoyed six years of being initiated and who participate in the annual amaBhaca male initiation ritual performance by helping those in charge throughout the season. After having explained the purpose of the study, I assured them that I would respect (and not reveal) their secrets and I would not reveal their names. What information is recorded here about the ritual, is what is available to the uninitiated. They helped me in this study because they too are concerned about the poor practice that is threatening the continuation of the ritual. They felt that a study such as this one was one way of addressing the problem. Their help and support was invaluable.

AmaBhaca as noted by Hammond-Tooke are suspicious of any questioning, fearing that the information may be used to assess them for taxation purposes. As a rule, men who reveal secrets are punished.

Not much has been written about amaBhaca in comparison to amaXhosa. The sources that become available are secondary sources written by Whites on what constitutes the amaBhaca culture – an ‘outsider’ perspective. *Circumcision among the AmaXhosa: A medical investigation* is a significant contribution from Funani, (1990) an ‘insider’ in that she is African, and – in a sense - an ‘outsider’ in that she is a woman. Funani writes about the impact and interference of white cultures on the practice of African rituals. As a woman, I felt encouraged by Funani’s example: she strengthened my spirit and I felt my research on the KwaBhaca male initiation ritual was worth the problems I was encountering.

On the amaBhaca specifically, I came across two books:

- one by Hammond-Tooke who dealt with amaBhaca based on information gained from amaBhaca at eLugangemi;
- the other by David Makaula whose title is *uMadzikane*. Being of Zulu descent he was able to narrate his descendants' story.

From the wider reading, as noted above, I discovered that the male initiation ritual is practiced globally, and that there are common elements and differences in the various places.

### 3.8 Translation and use of 'special' terms

- All Xhosa and Bhaca texts – songs, interviews, literature sources and passages, and terms have been translated into English to reach as wide a readership as possible.
- A Glossary of Terms is provided in APPENDIX A.
- I have used the term 'sources' and 'sources-by-proxy' to identify those people who provided me with the data which informed this study.
- I have used the terms 'initiands' and 'initiates' respectively to identify the boys **before** and **after** the ritual of circumcision.

## Chapter 4

### Characteristics of KwaBhaca Male Initiation Ritual

#### 4.1 Coming-of-age and Male Initiation

Coming-of-age is one of the anthropological 'milestones' of life and is usually marked by some form of initiation. All cultures celebrate these anthropological 'milestones', namely birth, naming, coming-of-age, marriage and death.

Male initiation in the south eastern region of South Africa is centuries old. This ritual's mode of celebration among KwaBhaca society shares much with that of amaXhosa but to a greater extent with that of amaHlubi. KwaHlubi male initiation rituals continue to influence KwaBhaca initiation up to the present era. Unlike the amaXhosa, the lack of initiation does not hinder KwaBhaca males from getting married and becoming the head of the family.

The amaBhaca male initiation ritual involves circumcision of the foreskin of the penis administered with a stroke of a *umdlanga* (spear) without the application of modern western medicines. The concept of manhood in amaBhaca terms centres on the excruciating pain of this form of circumcision. According to Funani (1990: 27), this practice

cannot be understood if it is examined in isolation; it should be left within the category of all practices of the same order which by cutting off, splitting or mutilating any part of the body modify the personality of the individual in a manner visible to all.

AmaBhaca male initiation is characterised by a seclusion period in a beehive-shaped hut - symbolic of a womb - in the bush, the observance of taboos and avoidance practices which involve the avoidance of women for the period of seclusion. There is evidence that male

initiation rituals were practiced when the tribe was still living in Natal, only to fall in disuse during the subsequent flight from Shaka (Hammond-Tooke 1982:7). Among KwaBhaca males the transition was marked by boys leaving to seek jobs in big cities but who, nonetheless, later showed responsibility for their parents and provided financial support.

Noganta (1993:13) views initiation as a major stage in the boys' lives, a milestone in their growth that is meant to equip them for the challenges of manhood. Initiation is seen as a divide between those 'who have' and 'who have not' gone to the bush. According to Mayer (1971:14), initiation is meant to change boys, who are intrinsically wild, into responsible men. Comparing this with the rite of Islam, Barrow makes the inference that circumcision was the only exterior mark that has remained of a religious or sacred institution. According to him, "the Kaffir considered circumcision" from the point of view of duty owed to the memory of his ancestors, a perspective on a "custom handed down to him as an example he was bound to follow" (Barrow 1801:212-213).

Parents need to be aware of their sons who are of an age to be initiated, as in the past boys have been known to steal away to be ritually circumcised. Health problems and the fast-spread of contagious diseases, demand that consensus be reached on handling this sacred ritual responsibly. Possible problems must be dealt with through easily accessible support in the event of things going wrong. Boys need to experience the process of enculturation in the early years of their lives, so that they become culturally stable and mature. To Beals and Hoijer (1971:538) enculturation focuses

on the acquisition of skills, habits and behaviours, norms, values and social rules whereas socialisation centres on the problem of learning social behaviours appropriate to a society.

These are behaviours that the 'initiates' have to relive and which they must hand down from generation to generation.

## **4.2 Initiation Rituals**

In this study, the stages through which the boys have to go prior to the proclamation of their status as men will be dealt with highlighting the characteristics of this ritual. The significance of the ritual, its impact and the progressive nature of that impact on the individual are highlighted by Gitywa (1976) and Moollan (1995) below.

Rituals therefore may be defined as formulaic patterns of symbolic actions for ordering or controlling relatively disorderly or uncontrollable situations, the hierarchical relationship between the levels of the structure within which the relations in question are defined (Gitywa 1976:7).

A ritual can and often does carry a message about social/cultural perpetuation. Those who undergo the ritual become committed to it and have an attentive state of mind. As these messages are transmitted beyond the generation that gave rise to them, they become oral traditions. Being a symbol, the rite receives its meaning only when related to the whole context in which it is elaborated. It evolves in accordance with situation and culture (Moollan 1995:35).

### **4.2.1 Preparations for the initiation**

Van Gennep (in Gitywa 1976:25) considers that

initiation is a dramatised passage from one status to another with a preliminal rite of separation, a liminal stage of isolation from profane life and a post-liminal rite of

aggregating the initiand to a new status and social environment. The life of an individual is subject to change through undergoing a series of passages from one age to another. The individual has to be prepared for these changes both mentally and physically for the ritual to succeed and to meet the expectations of the society. These boys have to face challenges coupled with this process of initiation to understand and give meaning to it.

Past experience of the male initiation ritual among amaBhaca reveals that initiating boys who are still young and immature is not effective. If boys are initiated when they are too young, they do not take what initiation entails seriously. For them it extends only as far as bonding with the group. Even after initiation, their behaviour leaves much to be desired. It is only natural that the boys have to experience a 'boyish' stage characterised by stealing, being mischievous, and so on, so that by the time he goes to the initiation school, he is ready to be transformed by the ritual, and then discards childhood behaviours.

As a result of past experience, boys today are initiated when they are twenty years old, when they are mature and ready to face reality. The boy and his parent(s) must agree on the issue. The parent(s) must ensure that his/her son is physically fit, healthy and ready to undergo the rite. This information is given to the men in charge of a group to be initiated. Preparations begin in April with a small group, as a means of forewarning those who feel that they are ready to participate that the time has arrived for circumcision. Each 'initiand' approaches an initiated young man to take him to the 'bush'. This information is confirmed by the parent(s) of the person concerned. These boys paint their faces with black ash to hide their identity. They signal their readiness and impatience to be initiated by moving about during the night singing and calling out that 'May and June' should come quickly. May and June are the months chosen for the ritual, because they are the cold months which facilitate healing and prevent the festering of wounds.

The 'initiands' are subject to strict discipline including abstinence from sexual relations. The traditional *ingcibi* (traditional surgeon) and the guardians also have to abstain from sexual relations for some weeks prior to being involved with the 'initiands'. The 'initiands' sing and beat calabashes making much noise, which encourages barking from the dogs who sense the excitement and join the spell. Uncircumcised men hide themselves fearing that the 'initiands' may force them to go with them to the *iphempe* (lodge). The 'initiands' disappear daily from the community as the time for departure draws closer. They return daily from the wilderness in the evening spilling food on the ground in any kraal they have entered, and then take any food that they find to be consumed in the forest. They are clothed in skins and covered with blankets to hide their identity. They wear *amahamasa* - tins tied around the legs which make a noise as they walk, warning people that they are coming. They talk to no-one.

#### 4.2.2 the *umngcamo* feast

Traditionally, on the third day before their departure, they return from the wilderness each carrying a log. They sing and dance while each of them throws his log into the chief's kraal. By this time *uSosuthu* (the host), on whose behalf the *iphempe* (lodge) will be built, is known. He provides traditional beer on this day which will be enjoyed by men from different locations who are gathered at the chief's kraal. A tribal dance takes place. Stick fighting is part of this ritual as it becomes a deciding factor as to who will play an active role in the stabbing of the bull for the ritual feasts associated with the initiation:

- the *umngcamo* feast - for the 'initiands' before they go to the mountain,
- the *umojiso* feast - given to initiates seven days after initiation.
- the *umphumo* feast - the 'coming-out' ceremony when the initiated men return home.

The 'initiators' are joined by another group and the number of the initiates to be initiated is usually twenty to fifty boys. All these boys fetch logs in the forest and throw them into *uSosuthu's* Kraal in preparation for the *umngcamo* and *umojiso* feasts. A bull will be slaughtered for the feast, and its hide will be used to dress the circumcised penis. *uSosuthu* (the host) brings this bull to the chief for his approval. It is customary for the bull to be protected with herbs by the *ixhwele* (traditional healer) so that it does not fall easily when stabbed. This has to do with the character of the boys being initiated. If the bull is stabbed and it falls down immediately, it signifies that the boys being initiated will be weak.

In the past, the initiated boys were trained to be warriors, chiefs and councillors. When the feast was held where meat was shared, the women would sit apart from the men. At such a feast, the 'initiators' would be protected by men. They would be given certain parts of the meat to eat, and the other parts would be mixed with preserving herbs for use in the *iphempe* (lodge). The feast would continue through the night with people enjoying traditional beer, while dancing also took place.

In some current practice, the stick fighting and the carrying of logs to the chief's and *uSosuthu's* kraals are excluded.

#### **4.2.3 The seclusion and the circumcision**

Early in the morning following the *umngcamo* feast, the 'initiators' leave for the seclusion of the *iphempe* (lodge) without notifying the community. *uSosuthu* (the host) will already have chosen the traditional *ingcibi* (traditional surgeon), and the *ikhankatha elikhulu* (head guardian) and his assistants, who with the help of the elders of the tribe, have the duty of monitoring the group that perform the initiation process. The 'initiators' run into the river and



bathe in icy water into which the *ixhwele* (traditional healer) pours herbs as they wash themselves. This rite is a form of confession to the people of the river about past misdeeds, and simultaneously a form of purification to appease them, and an appeal for their blessings in the process. The 'initiands' are taken to the river to bathe in order to ensure the constriction of the blood vessels to reduce haemorrhage during the operation and also for the purpose of ritual purification (Funani 1990:31).

The *ingcibi* (traditional surgeon) waits for them on the chosen spot to perform the operation. The boys sit at a distance singing while one of them proceeds to the *ingcibi* (traditional surgeon). As the spear goes through the foreskin of the penis, the boy has to shout, "I am a man" and must not shake or tremble. He is bandaged with *izichwe* (a poultice ground from a root known traditionally for its fast healing powers) and skins. The spear is plunged into a liquid made of herbs to kill germs, and to ensure that contamination and transference of germs is impossible. The *ixhwele* (traditional healer) monitors the process in the presence of the elders of the tribe.

While the boys are being initiated, the other young initiated men build the *iphempe* (lodge) with sticks and grass so that after the process the initiates will have a place to sleep and to spend the seclusion period which lasts for seven weeks. The *ingcibi* (traditional surgeon) performs his duty successfully with one spear allowing an interval between one operation and the other to ensure that germs have been killed before he proceeds with initiation of these boys. The *ingcibi* (traditional surgeon) together with the *ixhwele* (traditional healer) collects the skins and buries them secretly. The *ingcibi* (traditional surgeon) then cleans the spear, wraps it in a cloth and hides it so that it does not fall into the wrong hands. The *ingcibi* (traditional surgeon) concludes the initiation by swallowing a root, chewing it and spitting it

out. The boys are led to the *iphempe* (lodge) by the guardians while the elders return home to inform the boys' parents of the whereabouts of their sons, which information has to be kept secret. These people hold spiristic beliefs in ancestors and witchcraft. During the time immediately following initiation, the boys are considered vulnerable to the influence of evil spirits, therefore this information is regarded as highly secret, such as their whereabouts, until they have healed. The guardians do not return home for some days, as they also must not have contact with women, or talk with them and even touch the hands of their wives. They have to remain in seclusion with the newly initiated men.

Traditionally, the seclusion is meant to signify being removed from human habitation and separated from normal social relations especially those with women: being in "nature" away from "culture" (Mayer 1971:11). According to Funani (1990:27) the initiated individual is "removed by a rite of separation which automatically incorporates him into a defined group" and "since the operation leaves ineradicable traces the incorporation is permanent". Transformation occurs. These boys are called *abakhwetha* (initiates). They are painted with white ochre to show their contact with the ancestors and to hide their identity. The guardians' duties are clearly identified:

- to ensure that the bandages are changed frequently,
- to listen to the initiates' complaints,
- to report problems to the *ixhwele* (traditional healer),
- to see to it that the initiates receive sufficient food.

Sometimes the initiates become ill. The guardians must report any illness to the *ixhwele* (traditional healer) who attends to the illness. If the illness is not associated with the circumcision, more information is acquired from the initiate as to the history of the illness. In

the case of a chronic condition, an initiated man is sent to the new initiate's home to fetch his medication, or to inform the parents to provide them with such medication. If the illness requires the attention of a medical doctor, arrangements are made with such a practitioner to attend to the new ailing initiate in the evening in a private place appointed by him. The medical doctor in such cases should be an initiate himself, as a 'boy' could not attend to a 'man'.

A group of initiated men have to accompany the *ikrwala* (newly initiated man) to the medical doctor after the *ixhwele* (traditional healer) has protected them with herbs, as they believe that they will be going to walk through a polluted area which may affect their health. After the consultation with the medical doctor, the *ikrwala* (new initiate) will return with the men to the *iphempe* (lodge). At times, the *ikrwala* (new initiate) uses the opportunity to complain about the *ixhwele* (traditional healer) to the old initiates who in turn may find a substitute as the health of the new initiates is vital.

Critically important teaching takes place in the *iphempe* (lodge). The secrecy of manhood, a series of secret symbols and the secret language by which the men communicate, are impressed upon these initiates who must thereafter use this in their daily living. According to Raum (1973:518), the youth are furnished with substitutes to be used as everyday words, in place of a long list of common words. Herdt (1987:75) views secrecy as providing symbolic ways to rope off childhood experiences and keep the adult male identity separate from that of females. Some of the instruction given to the initiates involve the following:-

- i. Men do not fight: they talk things over;
- ii. Men respect the first initiated man irrespective of his age;
- iii. Men share the same powers;

- iv. Men do not talk loosely and irresponsibly.

A lot of artefacts, such as spears, wooden spoons, forks, etc., are made in the *iphempe* (lodge).

For the first few days, the new initiates eat *isishwala* (porridge) to which no salt has been added. They are allowed to drink no water, to avoid urination as this would irritate and infect the circumcised penis. Other initiated men visit them every day and some spend the nights with them. Their arrival is marked by singing such songs as *Okandlala Phaya*. The new initiates reply in a language peculiar to the group. Some boys are allowed to join those who are initiated and become part of the group, but they need to get permission from the elders who run the *iphempe* (lodge).

#### 4.2.4 the *umojiso* feast

On the eighth day, seven days after the circumcision, the new initiates are given *umojiso* (water). On this day, each parent brings a goat, traditional beer, *amarhewu* (unfermented beer) and bread. When they arrive, they stop on the other side of the mountain and sing. Men climb the mountain to fetch the goats. They fetch two to three goats at a time until the procedure is over. A sacrificial speech to the initiates' ancestors is made prior to the goats being slaughtered. Men roast the meat, share it with the other men and the remainder is sent to the people on the other side of the mountain who, in turn, hold their feast and serve traditional beer and food - the *umojiso* feast. A tribal dance is held until late at night. On this day, the *uSosuthu* (the host) announces the date on which the *umphumo* feast - the 'coming-out' ceremony when the initiated men return home - will be held, and the requirements for the day. Parents return home with empty containers. They send fifty kilograms of mealie-meal to the kraal of the *uSosuthu* (host) for preparing meals for the new initiates, as well as preparation for the return of the initiated men from the bush. Money for the services of the *ingcibi* (traditional

surgeon) and *ixhwele* (traditional healer) is paid. Other goods needed for the day are brought and sent to the *uSosuthu* (host) by parents. A prepubescent girl from each kraal, joins the group that takes food from the kraal of the *uSosuthu* (host) to the bush. They do not enter the *iphempe* (lodge) but, they stand at a distance and sing the following song:

*Uthikoloshe sisilwane esincinane*

*Uyayibiza le ngoma*

*Nam ndiyayibiza*

(Translation:

A dwarf is a small animal

He sings the song

I sing it too.)

The older initiated men come out and fetch the food, they empty the containers and return them to the girls. The girls return home, singing happily. They perform this duty throughout, even after the seclusion.

#### 4.2.5 The *umphumo* ceremony

Through the male initiation ritual of circumcision and seclusion, the amaBhaca

boy abandons his status as a child and with it the obligations and rights in the family of orientation associated with childhood (Ngxamngxa 1971:193).

Preparation for the great day gets underway at the kraal of *uSosuthu* (the host), and at the homes of the newly initiated men. Initiation ceremonies mark and organise the transition from childhood to socially recognised adulthood:

they are the means of divesting a person of his status as a child in the domestic domain and investing him with the status of actual or potential citizen in the politico-jural-domain (Gluckman 1962:16).

Such ceremonies bring about solidarity in the community which witnesses the entrance into the adulthood of the young men once they have gone through all the stages as necessitated by the ritual. The early stage in the *umphumo* ceremony is marked by the return of the new initiates from the bush.

The departure from the *iphempe* (lodge) is marked by bathing in the river all morning, after which they are painted with red ochre instead of white. On this day, they acquire a new name, that of *amakrwala*. Towards sunset, they take two sticks, a spear and a wooden spoon. As the sun sets, they stab at it with their spears. They then return to the kraal of *uSosuthu* (the host), where the little girls help them to dress in beads and handkerchiefs.

A red cloth is tied around the head, a yellow cloth is tied across the chest and a green cloth across the back. The red cloth signifies that the task of the man is to think clearly and be discriminating. The yellow and the green cloths cross the shoulder blades, where the man's strength is believed to be focused. These two cloths signify the need for a man to act very wisely and with thought and deliberation: rash and impulsive behaviour is not the mark of a Bhaca man. They move into the kraal where they are admonished by the chief and the men. On this day the praise poems and initiation songs are part of the "presentation and transformation that underpins oral tradition, articulating bodily relations in space" (Bester 1993:155).

These *amakrwala* return to the area which lies between the kraal and the huts. Each of the *amakrwala* sings his favourite song. Thereafter he appeases his ancestors for blessing his stay in the *iphempe* (lodge) - *uyazitoga*. Thereafter the sons of *uSosuthu* (the host) sit in the centre. Relatives, parents and sisters present the son of *uSosuthu* (the host) with *uyasokwa* (gifts). His father indicates the hut where he has to put his belongings. He receives new clothes, basins and spoon. He wears khaki clothes and has a hat on his head. Tisani identifies the effect of this process:

Oral traditions enhance a sense of togetherness that is sanctified by the mystery of a distant past and it helps to create communal identity through unity of experience in the past (1994:169).

People from all walks of life gathered here for one thing and nothing else. A tradition that evokes the spirits of men and are moved by the songs and praise poems that oneness prevails in them. A feast is held and traditional beer is served throughout the day. Later *uSosuthu* (the host) expresses his gratitude to the parents who helped to make the day successful. He ceremonially hands over the *amakrwala* to their parents. *amakrwala* (the newly initiated men) are divided according to the location of their homes. They move in different directions as some come from far away. Celebrations in the same manner as at *uSosuthu*'s kraal, are held from kraal to kraal as each *amakrwala* – the newly initiated man – is brought home. Those who have no kraals, must improvise, as a kraal is a necessity. Depending on the wealth of a family, some slaughter a goat as well as an ox – known as a 'great ceremony' – while others merely slaughter a goat with the hope of having a 'great ceremony' at a later stage.

At home, the *ikrwala* (the newly initiated man) drives his father's cattle into the veld where he looks after them without being seen. At midday, he brings the cattle home and milks them.

Men accompany him to wash off the red ochre. His blankets are shortened, he carries only one stick, and is permitted to communicate with girls.

Relationships develop within the group of *amakrwala* which were initiated together. They are often found together sharing their experiences using *isikhwetha* (secret language). A sharp distinction between *amakrwala* and boys is maintained. The behaviour of the *amakrwala* is monitored to ensure that the initiation secrets remain sacred. If one of the *amakrwala* commits a crime, he is brought before a committee of his peers. "Reconciliation for the breach of a ritual prohibition (...) by means of a sacrifice which has a symbolic meaning" (Ngxamngxa 1971:76) follows. The guilty *ikrwala* has to pay a goat which is sacrificed, and he is warned for deviating from the rules. It is crucial that the behaviour of the wayward *ikrwala* is monitored, as he may act in an unacceptable way, despising those who hold the ritual sacred, which will result in people referring to a 'failed initiation'. Strict discipline will send a message to the youth as to what manhood is about. Some youth who are members of the group of *amakrwala* fail to internalise the rules and meaning of 'manhood', and it is these who commit crimes. A continuous breach of the traditional values calls for the suspension of such individuals, or even expulsion, for a period of two to three years. This serves as a warning to others as to how serious the matter is in the eyes of the ancestors and among a society of men.

By inculcating in the young men principles whereby they must conduct their lives, of being loyal citizens who put the pride of the tribe to the fore, the continuity of the tradition is assured and the wisdom of the ancestors is preserved. It helps to shape the boys' behaviour in a way acceptable and prized by society.



## Chapter 5

### Modifications to the KwaBhaca Male Initiation Ritual

AmaBhaca, like all other societies, have undergone acculturation – a process wherein exchange of cultural traits between societies living in continuous first-hand contact produce a hybrid having elements of both represented portions. One such influence, colonization as viewed by Nkabinde (1988:273), resulted in “social disorganization, a change in the lifestyle of the people and the attrition of the arts and creative composition”. AmaBhaca were further disorganized by wars and fights, and - being homeless - they wandered, splitting up as a tribe into various groups under various leaders.

#### 5.1 Historical Modifications

The amaBhaca finally mingled with other groups, intermarrying with the inhabitants of the particular territory they lived in for any length of time. As they reached each new territory, they were influenced by the cultures practiced there, which they then adopted so as to identify with the local people. In this respect, Murdock maintains that

whenever social behavior persistently deviates from established cultural habits in any direction, it results in the modification first in the social expectations and then in customs, beliefs and rules. The changes in the social behaviour have their origin in some significant alteration in the life conditions of a society with habitual actions discouraged and new responses favoured thus leading to cultural innovations (1985:87).

AmaBhaca form of dress changed from *itidzwaba* (traditional form of dress made from skins) and adapted to the form of modern dress commonly and currently used in the area.

Some of the traditions became discouraged as they were influenced by new cultures, for instance, *ingcubhe* (celebration of the ripening fruit) - a popular tradition of amaBhaca - is no longer practised.

## 5.2 Current modifications

My sources inform me that there have been no modifications to the essential meaning and significance of the male initiation ritual and circumcision in the bush, and that the traditional *iingcibi* (traditional surgeons) still perform the ritual successfully with very few fatalities using only one spear to initiate a number of boys. Any innovations brought in affect the form of the ritual, but not the meaning or purpose. For example, although Western culture has exerted such a great influence on the society, they still make sacrifices to the ancestors and use ochre to hide their identity.

In this section I document these modifications to the form of the tradition.

The KwaBhaca male initiation ritual always involves some form of teaching, and imparting of messages vital in the life of a man: songs and proverbs are used to communicate with the group, and maintain the secrecy that separates the uninitiated and initiated men. Boys are introduced to hardship, told to abstain from sexual relations and to observe the rules as prescribed to them. A great deal of secrecy surrounds this teaching which includes a secret language known only to the initiated. It is this teaching and language that separates the 'boys' from the 'men' as much as the ritual circumcision. This secrecy around the male ritual is so strictly kept that at times it leads to major problems, such as in the case where a man encounters problems during initiation but refuses to be hospitalized as he fears that he will be the target of ridicule. This notwithstanding, the teaching and the status of manhood are so

highly regarded that many parents request that their sons be permitted to join the *iphempe* (lodge) once the circumcision has been performed in a hospital. To them hospitalisation of the boys prior to entering the *iphempe* (lodge) may relieve them of fear. The problem here involves the actions of a man which need to be attended to and be corrected. They recognise the importance of the secret traditional teaching.

In amaBhaca society, there is a code of conduct by which a man must live. In the past, a man reached maturity by leaving home for the mines. In the recent past, boys initiated at the age of sixteen to eighteen years of age have created problems, in that they have demonstrated their inability to abide by the norms and values impressed on them. Currently, attainment of maturity is determined by age, the base of which is twenty years. At the age of twenty years, it is believed that a boy must have gone through the boyish stages, and be ready to enter the new stage of *ubudoda* (manhood). It is also believed that in order to become a man you must have gone through the rite of *ukwaluka* (circumcision), be admonished by men, and have internalized the secrets that separate men from boys.

AmaBhaca boys used to begin their preparations for initiation by singing, calling for May and June to come, beating the *ityalo* (calabash), as a reminder to the society of the approaching season for turning boys into men. Today, the tradition involves secrecy even in the planning stages. Only the people directly involved, viz. the participants and the parents, are aware of what is happening.

The departure for the mountain used to be marked by noise in the evening and the ululating of women in the morning, alerting the community to the fact that there were boys who were to become men. I remember a very cold morning in 1971, when I was woken up by the noise of

jubilation which was taking place outside. These days, there are no such signs to alert the community to the event. Only when people become aware of the absence of certain individuals, will they begin to inquire from others as to the whereabouts of the missing individuals. As the debate stretches over days, it becomes obvious that the period of absence is lengthy, and still there is no word about the missing boys. Information regarding their whereabouts is revealed only after they have been initiated. And what remains a secret even then is the location of the *iphempe* (lodge) in which they have been secluded, as there are a number of *amaphempe* (lodges) under different chiefs.

Nowadays, boys may even leave their areas and receive initiation in another area e.g. boys from amaXesibe recently entered the *iphempe* (lodge) in the Chacele location. Sometimes, this has to do with their belief in witchcraft. It may appear that the boy is merely visiting in another area, whereas he is actually secluded in the *iphempe* (lodge).

### 5.2.1 due to contact with other ethnic groups

The migration of amaBhaca from their land of origin, the loss of Madzikane - their inspired and very able leader - left them vulnerable to the influence of those societies of which they became a part. They had to communicate with these societies, a case which necessitated a common language. AmaBhaca lost their identity and the *thsefula* dialect, and Xhosa became the main language of communication. While an area near Ixopo is still strongly influenced by the *thsefula* dialect, it is no longer common on the outskirts of Mount Frere: only the old people still mix Xhosa with the elements of this dialect in this region.

The collective habits alter as the cultures come to "accord with the new norms of actual behaviour" (Murdoch 1960:87). The amaBhaca male initiation ritual owes its existence and

survival to the amaHlubi whose *amaphempe* (lodges) attracted them and in which they became circumcised. The elements and symbols of the amaHlubi male initiation ritual feature in the KwaBhaca male initiation ritual notwithstanding the effect of the amaXhosa initiation ritual on the Bhaca boys who attend their institutions. Not all KwaBhaca boys are circumcised. By comparison, most boys among amaXhosa are initiated before they enter the marriageable stage.

What is peculiar to the amaBhaca performance of the ritual is that no photographs are taken and the ritual remains a purely 'lived' experience.

### **5.2.2 due to urbanisation and modern economies**

Urbanisation and the modernisation of the economies used in KwaBhaca communities have had the following effects on the performance of the male initiation ritual.

In the past, men admonished the newly initiated men in the kraal. Nowadays there are few places with kraals, therefore parents improvise a kraal in the space between the house and the society. Modernity has resulted in the performance of the ritual in the comfort of the sittingroom with traditional beer being absent.

*Amaphempe* (lodges) in some areas are built close to human habitation whereas the tradition requires that the seclusion should for some biological reasons be distanced from the community.

The custom of *ukutheza* - the collecting of wood with some taken to the chief and the rest to the kraal of *uSosuthu* (the host) - is no longer practiced.

The *umngcamo* feast (for the initiates before they go to the mountain), and the *umojiso* (feast given to initiates seven days after initiation) are still performed as before, except that there are some modifications here and there in their performance. In the past, for example, the *umngcamo* feast was an open feast attended by everyone. Today only those who are close to the area where the kraal of the *uSosuthu* (host) is, know about it.

Influence of the trader is also seen in the *ukusoka* ceremony where the initiate is presented with gifts that have been bought, whereas in the past his grandfather would make gifts of spears, cattle, goats etc.

Some parents do have great feasts after the initiation ceremony whereas others hold small parties in welcoming him because of fiscal constraints.

In the past, those responsible for the performance of the male initiation tradition depended on the harvest for plenty of food to feed the initiates. Without this source of healthy food, the *amaphempe* (lodges) often cannot feed the initiates enough wholesome food, thus contributing to their low resistance to infection. It is interesting to note that most of the cases of maiming and death that are reported are from the townships rather than from rural areas.

Nowadays, the performance of the ritual involves payment of money by the parents to the traditional *ingcibi* (traditional surgeon) and the *ixhwele* (traditional healer), whereas in the past these services were provided as a means of demonstrating service to the chief and as part of their community duty, without expecting any form of payment.

The seclusion period had been shortened to accommodate students and workers. In the past it used to be three months, but this has been reduced to as little as seven weeks depending on the area.

### 5.2.3 due to youth culture

Traditionally, amaBhaca boys were obedient and compliant and would follow the instructions of parents and elders. This is no longer always the case.

Nowadays, boys of school-going age are strongly attracted to the ritual, whereas in the past, there were few such cases among the school-going groups who tended to view the initiation as unimportant. There have been instances where some boys steal away secretly to undergo the ritual, without informing their parents, who are astonished when men bring their son's clothes from the *iphempe* (lodge). In other instances, people in charge of the boys seek permission from the parent(s) after being approached by the boy who wants to be initiated. These guardians also seek indemnity from the parents so that they cannot be blamed in the event of something going wrong. But sometimes, the consent of the parents cannot be obtained as unschooled parents are sometimes overruled by their literate and schooled sons.

On the other hand, one parent voiced the fear that even after sending his son to the *iphempe* (lodge), he might still join a gay community at the end of the day. The father felt that his children distance themselves from what their parents see as their pride in being human. Their children tend to call their parents old-fashioned for they see no need to suffer hardship unnecessarily.

The freedom of personal rights also poses a threat to the ritual. One conservative member voiced his concerns that the very thing which earlier proclaimed the identity of the individual – the male initiation ritual - is now losing its value, as some of these initiates find themselves at home in a gay family even after having gone through initiation. He felt that this reduced the traditional ritual to *imikhuba* (customary practice), and that it no longer held the status of a 'tradition', which would be held sacred.

Furthermore, today there is a great number of single parents who do not have satisfactory control over their sons. Even those who are staunch supporters of the tradition feel threatened by the behaviour of their sons. This stems from the way the youth is influenced by the outside world so that they tend to neglect their roots. When these boys pose problems, the parents believe that by sending them to the *iphempe* (lodge), their behaviour will improve and they will 'grow up' and behave in a mature and sensible manner. Such parents rely on the men in the *iphempe* (lodge) to guide and monitor their sons.

The youth are very taken up by the changes in the outside world. Some parents have a view that it is hard to channel the life of their sons to what is the pride of their nation as the youth want to identify with certain characters some of whose behaviour threaten the parents.

In the past, boys who went to the 'bush' adhered to societal norms, including that of abstinence from sexual relations. Under those circumstances it was not necessary to undergo medical tests to check for chronic medical conditions. Today's youth become sexually active as young as twelve years of age, thus it becomes necessary that the state of their health be established prior to acceptance into the group. Often, these boys have to be tested for physical



fitness and the state of their health, including testing for diseases, such as sexually transmitted diseases and diseases associated with poverty and malnourishment.

#### **5.2.4 due to modern disease and medicine**

Because HIV/Aids is currently so prevalent, and because there is evidence that the youth do not maintain sexual purity before being initiated, those in charge of the initiation now often call for a blood test to be conducted prior to the boy becoming involved in the preparations.

#### **5.2.5 due to literacy and the loss of traditional knowledge**

In the past, only the traditional herbs supplied by the *ixhwele* (traditional healer) were permitted to be used in the *iphempe* (lodge). This was successful as long as hygiene and the traditional rules were maintained, but much of the traditional knowledge has been lost, and modern diseases must be taken into account. Today hygiene cannot be guaranteed: neither can it be guaranteed that the 'initiators' are free from disease without having undergone a medical test. Therefore, the committee in charge of the *iphempe* (lodge) might accept the services of the medical doctor (Western) together with western medicine in the *iphempe* (lodge). In the past, this was prohibited.

## Chapter 6

### Concerns surrounding Male Initiation Ritual in South Africa

#### 6.1 Some history of maimings and fatalities associated with male initiation rituals in South Africa

The by-line to Noganta's City Press (27/06/1999:13) article reads:

as another season to turn boys into men arrives in the eastern Cape, Andile Noganta ponders if the lives that are almost certainly going to be lost are not sacrificed at the altar of traditional rigidity.

This is not a recent or isolated concern.

Funani (1990:27) provides us with statistics for the years 1981-1986, between November and January, on cases of botched circumcisions admitted at Nompumelelo hospital as follows:

1981 – 1982	=	18
1981 – 1983	=	20
1981 – 1984	=	18
1981 – 1985	=	27
1981 – 1986	=	24

Noganta reports that twenty-seven boys of the Bhala (sic) tribe of eastern Pondoland experienced post-circumcision complications in the winter of 1997 (Noganta *City Press* 27/06/1999:13).

The *Sowetan* (03/07/1998) reports that “seven Xhosa circumcision initiates were in a critical condition in hospital after botched circumcision”, and since the initiation season has begun, three initiates had been admitted to the Glen Grey hospital in Lady Frere, three to the Cecilia Makhiwane Hospital, and a further one in Cofimvaba near Queenstown. According to the sources at the Glen Grey hospital some initiates were badly circumcised.

The Cecilia Makhiwane Hospital in the township of Mdantsane in the Eastern Cape admits no less than thirty *abakhwetha* (initiates) every initiation season (Noganta 27/06/1999:13), and statistics reveal that for the period 1991-1993, up to 55 initiates at a time were admitted to this hospital. Geoffrey Xoxa (in Noganta 27/06/1999:13) who is part of the task-team working from Bisho in the Eastern Cape says eleven *abakhwetha* (initiates) died and 222 were admitted with wounds at an advanced stage of complication from five different circumcision rituals between 1991 and 1993. In some areas, problems surrounding initiation are escalating with great losses being suffered by the society (Noganta 1999).

Noganta (1999) appeals to those who perform the ritual to consider the seriousness of the problem surrounding the initiation of boys in some areas of the Eastern Cape, where the traditional process does not meet the expectations of a grief-stricken society. Noganta’s appeal focuses on “the customary cut” being made “safer”.

Under such circumstances, it becomes necessary to seek for the source of contention and not to assume the cause of the problem to be inexperience only as there may be other factors contributing to the problem.

We need to ask:

- Why have these problems escalated in areas where the ritual has been successfully performed for over a century?
- Should the problem to be attributed to the initiation practitioners?

In response to the above, it is important to note that while the amaBhaca society has experienced incidence of loss of life associated with the male initiation ritual, and a few cases have been attended to by a medical doctor, such instances are rare and occur on a much smaller scale in comparison with the rest of the Eastern Cape. Where fatalities and maimings have occurred, these losses are blamed on the expertise of the *ingcibi* (traditional surgeon) and the inability of the *ixhwela* (traditional healer) to find the correct root used by our forefathers to help the wounds heal much faster. Parents have begun to prefer certain areas where they feel that *ingcibi* (traditional surgeon) shows signs of having the expertise and is performing the ritual to the expectations of the people without loss of life. Areas where initiates have died, are avoided.

## 6.2 the role of the *iingcibi* (traditional surgeons)

It is widely held that the *iingcibi* (traditional surgeons) contribute to the serious problems encountered in the *amaphempe* (lodges), when they indulge in practices that are contrary to the moral discipline of the tradition. Such breaches of conduct include the following:

- On the day prior to initiation, they indulge in drinking traditional beer with other men throughout the night. The following day, they have to operate on the boys. Because of the previous night's drinking, they are in no condition to perform the operation responsibly. In some instances, they may make several unsuccessful attempts to remove the foreskin before getting it right thus subjecting the initiate to extreme and unnecessary pain. In some cases, the circumcision is so badly performed that serious injury is caused and the penis

has to be amputated. In such instances, the initiates become psychologically traumatized: Boys who have had their penises amputated often commit suicide as they see themselves as outcasts.

- The *iingcibi* (traditional surgeons) do not always abstain from sexual relations for a week before they perform the rituals.
- The subject of monetary reward for this traditional practice has attracted charlatans and quacks to the traditional arena whose only real interest is financial gain, and not concern for the young men, the tradition or the ritual itself. They are a serious threat to the lives of the initiates.

Some people attribute these botched circumcisions to a lack of training on the part of the *iingcibi* (traditional surgeons), and advocate improved training. The *iingcibi* (traditional surgeons), on the other hand, claim that they have inherited their skills from their elders, while others claim that they have learned their skill from observing their fathers perform the ritual. But some of the *iingcibi* (traditional surgeons) who perform best are untrained. The training of traditional surgeons alone does not seem to be the answer to the problem. There are other considerations.

### **6.3 the role of the *Ixhwele* (traditional healer)**

*Ixhwele* (traditional healer) supplies the medicines to heal the circumcision wound and to protect the health of the boys. During my visit to Mount Frere, I learnt of an initiate who died in the *iphempe* (lodge). The initiated men lay the blame for this death on the *ixhwele* (traditional healer) as they doubt his expertise.

As part of the initiation, these boys are deprived of water to avoid urination which might infect the wound. This often leads to dehydration and inhibits healing. The dehydrated boys have to be hospitalised which is avoidable.

#### **6.4 materials and substances used in the circumcision ritual**

The original knowledge of the herbal preparations, and the materials for dressing the wounds used traditionally in the circumcision ritual have largely disappeared along with their oral sources. Consequently, the herbal preparations currently used, and the materials used for dressing the wounds cannot be relied upon. In many instances:

- no proper bandages are used to bandage the wounds. According to Funani (1990:41) some dressings consists of old “mealie-leaf sheath or brown paper”. Some current *ixhwele* (traditional healers) use commercially tanned skins and hides in place of the traditionally cured hides or skins. Such hides and skins cause rather than inhibit infection.
- irregular changing of the bandages encourages the festering of wounds.
- the dressings and bandages are not sterile and this also promotes infection.
- the traditional way of sterilising the spear has been replaced by the use of methylated spirits or boiling, in an attempt to ensure that germs are killed. These means are not guaranteed against modern viruses and bacteria.

#### **6.5 the role of chronic illness and sexually transmitted diseases**

Malnourishment and poverty are sometimes the constant companions of the boys who go for initiation. It stands to reason that such people will have a lowered resistance to infection and be susceptible to illness and infection.

Some of the illnesses of the boys are not related to the contamination by germs but are the reaction of the body to the ritual - something which cannot be cured by the *ixhwele* (traditional healer). It becomes necessary to consider the safety of the initiate by referring him to the medical doctor.

In addition, amaBhaca society views the fast spreading HIV/Aids pandemic as a major blow to the initiation process as the spread of the virus is already, and will continue, to contribute to the fatalities. In some areas the ritual has turned into a death knell for the boys. The rule of abstinence from sexual relations prior the proclamation of a marriageable state, could prevent the calamity, but such rules of abstinence are things, sadly, of the past. This can be attributed to the lack of counselling of boys on the procedures and rules involved in how to maintain their virginity and sexual purity to ensure that they are free from diseases at the time of marriage. We cannot run away from the fact that the society has undergone acculturation to keep up pace with the world in which they find themselves. It has led them to relinquish their roots and become culturally 'fossilised'.

Some parents are afraid of the results of their sons' blood tests, and therefore resist having blood tests done prior to initiation.

#### **6.6 the conditions in the *amaphempe* (lodges)**

It has been discovered that some of the problems experienced during initiation are created by the malnourishment of the 'initiands'. Some of the boys initiated are said to be undernourished thus their bodies are vulnerable to disease and infection, in such circumstances as:

- The icy cold water in which the initiates bathe in the early mornings causes them to catch cold. Some have ended up developing pneumonia.
- The boys are exposed to the cold but they have few blankets to provide heat and the conditions in the *iphempe* (lodge) cannot make them warm. They cannot bring more blankets as these are burned at the end of the seclusion.
- In the *amaphempe* (lodges), hygienic cleanliness cannot be maintained due to the condition of the place and the boys are subjected to hard conditions and have to survive them.
- Lack of authority may result in girls entering the *iphempe* (lodge), which is unacceptable, and unhygienic.

### **Concluding comments**

It is clear from the above that there is genuine reason for concern about

- the safety of the manner in which the seclusion and circumcision are being carried out;
- the survival of the tradition, which is being threatened by documented poor practice and the resultant maiming and deaths of the initiates.

Ways in which these issues should be addressed in the following chapter.



## Chapter 7

### Conclusions and recommendations

#### Introductory comments ...

The male initiation ritual as performed and practiced in KwaBhaca in the Eastern Cape unites society and evokes their spirit. The tradition is meant to build the character of men and instil in them the norms and values cherished by the society and so that the tradition continues to live.

External influences raise the question as to the ability of this sacred ritual to continue into the next millenium as before challenged by change and acculturating conditions in keeping with the rest of society. The continuation of the ritual is important, in spite of the problems currently associated with it. Its abolition is unlikely. What then should be done about the situation? Wise people view prevention as being better than cure.

Nowadays, boys of school-going age are strongly attracted to the ritual, whereas in the past, there were few such cases among the school-going groups who tended to view the initiation as unimportant. In addition, some parents want modification to be introduced due to the behaviour of their youth, which leaves much to be desired.

Some form of modification needs to be applied in some way, but without violating the dignity and importance of the tradition. If the problems at each stage in the rite, and the ways used to overcome them, are documented, those who want to be involved would learn from the mistakes so as not to repeat them.

### 7.1 the role of the (*iingcibi*)traditional surgeons

The writer attributes many of the health complications leading to maiming and death to the fact that the *iingcibi* (traditional surgeons) in the affected areas are inexperienced in the requisite procedures.

Experienced *iingcibi* (traditional surgeons) and *iamahwele* (traditional healers) are available in some areas but not in others. The Committee that can engage the services of such experienced practitioners is fortunate. A school for the training of experienced and responsible *iingcibi* (traditional surgeons) and *amaxhwele* (traditional healers) should be made available. Thus some assessment of the skills of appointed *ingcibi* (traditional surgeon) and *ixhwele* (traditional healer) and tracking of their records must be done prior to their being assigned the duty.

The drinking of traditional beer before and during the period of initiation and seclusion is a problem. This should be monitored by committees to establish to what extent this influences the work of the *ingcibi* (traditional surgeon). To date this has been partly blamed for the injuries and loss of life. The *iingcibi* (traditional surgeons) should always abstain from sexual relations for a week before they perform the rituals.

When the society learns about instances of death and injury, it is often argues that this is due to the fact that only one spear is being used on all the initiates. It is then felt that the *ingcibi* (traditional surgeon) should use a number of spears.

The practice of using one spear to initiate a whole group of boys is seen as a tool to exterminate the youth of the present century because of the fact that HIV/Aids is transmitted

by contaminated blood. Sexually transmitted diseases are common today. They may be transferred from one boy to another, which may wipe out the whole group. Popular opinion holds that the *ingcibi* (traditional surgeon) is bound because of the current incidence of HIV/Aids) to use one spear per initiate and to cater for the unforeseen. I believe that they are missing the point. The number of spears that are used will not have any effect. What is important is the expertise, knowledge and the conduct of those involved in the performance of the ritual and the circumcision. The spears need to be sterilised in a way other than the traditional way to ensure that the germs are killed so that safety is guaranteed. The present safe-practice record being experienced by KwaBhaca society is not guaranteed to last, thus it is vital that other ways be sought to guarantee continued safety.

The source of contention needs be traced back from the initiate's state of health to the circumciser, his methods and the tools he uses. Today it is a rule that the doctor uses a needle to inject only one patient and as a patient you have to make sure that the needle that is to be used is new for your health's sake. One spear for operating on the boys among KwaBhaca society has had fruitful results until now, but safety precautions need to be applied.

Parents need to know the *ingcibi* (traditional surgeon) who will perform the ritual well so that they can choose the best *iphempe* (lodge) for their son. Some parents display their dissatisfaction with the way the guardians behave and perform their duties, by sending their sons to hospital for the circumcision, and then send them to the *iphempe* (lodge) to be introduced to the secret codes of behaviour and language of the men. This can help to minimise threats involved in the 'bush' initiation.

The traditional *ingcibi* (traditional surgeon) and the medical doctor need to relinquish their pride and status and come to terms with each other and their respective knowledge. In this way they will prevent calamity and be of vital service to the community.

## 7.2 The role of the *amaxhwele* (traditional healers)

The *ixhwele* (traditional healer) does not always have the requisite knowledge of common and modern diseases.

It is the practice among the *amaxhwele* (traditional healers) to deprive the initiates of water for the first seven days, to inhibit urination which is considered to cause pain and infection. However, water is a critical element of healing, so the lack of water is damaging rather than helpful. Initiates should be allowed water in the lodge.

The committee, guardians and *amaxhwele* (traditional healers) need to be educated on the fact that the bacteria from one person to another are different. It is vital to call the medical doctor immediately when confronted with a problem.

The *ixhwele* (traditional healer) and the westernised medical doctor need to put aside their differences and reach a common understanding where they share their knowledge to the benefit of the patient. The diseases that are emerging cannot be cured with traditional herbs, that is why the services of the medical doctor are required. Though other writers acknowledge the services rendered by medical doctors or Western medicines in the process, it is not enough. Should the traditional healer fail in his duty, he should be replaced. One cannot experiment with human life.

### 7.3 Materials and substances used in the circumcision ritual

Infection, and consequent maiming and death, can be the result of dirty and inappropriate dressings and healing substances, and unhygienic practices in the cleaning of the spear used for the circumcision. The material used for bandages need to be changed to ensure that they are not contaminated with germs.

The Ciskei has recently imported a new instrument from Namibia in an attempt to stop the maiming and deaths associated with the male initiation rituals. This is puzzling as it is clear that the problems arising out of the practice of male initiation rituals is the result of bad human practice not mechanical failure.

There is a need for a liaison officer from health to help to improve the ways of performing the ritual and the materials to bandage the wounds as required by the present conditions, without violating the tradition.

### 7.4 Conditions in the *amaphempe* (lodges)

Some serious injuries result from neglect in the *iphempe* (lodge) by those in charge of the boys. Old men should be present in the *iphempe* (lodge) – *in loco parentis* - to monitor the process: they need to be answerable for the events during the period of seclusion, and for any problems that may arise in the *iphempe* (lodge). They should ensure that women do not enter the *iphempe* (lodge) nor come close to the initiates.

No addictive or hallucinatory drugs or substances should be permitted in the *iphempe* (lodge), as this frequently results in abnormal and criminal behaviour. Some become addicted to drugs and become heavy drinkers after the initiation, even though they never tasted drink before the

seclusion and circumcision. Such a burden on society after the seclusion cannot be tolerated. It is to instances of this kind that Mayer (1971) refers when he speaks of a “failed initiation”, as this kind of behaviour does not comply with social expectations.

There is further room for the improvement in the ritual if members of the health sector can be of service in the performance of the ritual. By sending the ‘initiands’ to a medical doctor a month prior to their entrance in the *iphempe* (lodge) to carry out tests for dangerous diseases can help to eliminate problems, or can give a clue as to what to look at in the stages that follow. The ritual should remain sacred and need not be tampered with.

### **7.5 the role of chronic illnesses and sexually transmitted diseases**

The youth need to know what initiation is about before they decide to participate in it. Their health is vital and they are responsible for it. Some of the problems are created by the youth not being aware of their responsibility to themselves. Knowing oneself leads to looking for what is right and what informs your society.

HIV/Aids is becoming a great threat in the performance of the ritual as it is not easy to predict how many have been affected. Nowadays, children as young as twelve years of age become involved in sexual relationships, as result of which no child over the age of twelve years can be assumed to be sexually pure and disease free. As the society is concerned with turning of boys into men they have to take cognisance of the state of health of the boys prior to sending them for initiation.

The society is concerned about the introduction of an awareness programme regarding the HIV/Aids epidemic, the public acknowledgement of the epidemic and the acceptance of

everyone in the community, in schools, churches and social gatherings. As a teacher, I have learned that for effective communication, information needs to be shared one-to-one. It is my experience that even very shy young girls and those that we would least expect to become sexually active, become pregnant as early as Grade 8. When the information is disclosed to the school, they treat it lightly and a matter of no concern taking no note of the seriousness of the implications in the light of the outbreak of the disease HIV/Aids. The approach to the individual should be motherly, caring and nurturing with the intention of alerting him/her to the dangers involved in sexual intercourse. The youth have a strong desire to conform, and want to meet with the expectations of their peers, thus they cannot make independent decisions of their own in the presence of the group, but will favour the group thinking.

All 'initiators' must undergo blood tests to establish the presence of sexually related and other diseases prior to joining the group. This must be done with the knowledge and consent of the parents. Parents must report all their sons' chronic ailments, and must remain in contact with their sons throughout the period of seclusion. Men like to conceal their sickness and this sometimes costs them their lives. They need to be convinced of the importance of this procedure and those who refuse to have blood tests should not be recruited. In this way, primary problems will be overcome.

#### **7.6 the significance of the season, the climate and the weather**

The season during which the ritual is performed is critically important. As a result of instances of pneumonia and other conditions related to the cold, some parents may prefer to have their sons initiated in the summer. Others prefer initiation to take place in winter, regardless of the cold because the heat of summer encourages the festering of wounds. Most of the cases related

to the festering of boys' wounds are of boys who are initiated during the summer months. The society's problem is on how they can overcome the cold problem that results in sickness.

### 7.7 The role of parents

Parents do not always know the *ingcibi* (traditional surgeon) who will perform the ritual well enough, so that they do not always choose the best *iphempe* (lodge) for their son.

KwaBhaca society does its best to maintain the purity of the ritual by involving the old men in all crucial areas. They monitor the services of the *ixhwele* (traditional healer) and if they are not satisfied another one is called. Some meetings need to be called where parents are lectured on the role they can play in preparing the youth, the role of the youth in preparing to face the period of initiation without fear.

Each individual needs to be aware of the role s/he can play that we hold to what informs our societies and its significance to our being. As Noganta views it, the high mortality rate of the *abakhwetha* could, in time, be the death knell of the tradition. As long as the sources we still have can be used to document what the tradition means to us as a society and how it has succeeded up to the present era, the traumas suffered by the initiates will be something of the past. This calls for the revival of uBuntu, which is fading in our present generations.

### Final comments ...

Society needs to seek ways to foresee and overcome problems before they escalate and result in what is seen as a disaster. In the view of some people, the tradition needs to continue as before, but that it should also meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century without anyone feeling



threatened by the performance of the tradition. They must learn to be proud of their own traditions.

The societies that share the same ritual need to share their successes so as to learn of the ways in which they can improve their own practice without violating the rules. This will contribute to the survival of the ritual. A society without culture does not exist. If we lose our culture we shall be 'empty' or 'naked' and without direction. The youth need to know their roots as a point of departure in life in creating their own world.

The problems facing the ritual become valuable if they send a message to our society of the possible loss of our culture. We need to balance health and custom. We learn wisdom from failure much more than from success. Innovations in the ritual would be effective if the society is prepared to face reality and seek what is worth saving - the lives of the youth.

## Conclusion

Through initiation, the values, traditional wisdom and identity of the society is transmitted in the performance of the ritual to future generations. Circumcision and initiation, as viewed by Gitywa

have shown great tenacity and plasticity under the impact of European contact. Changes in social behaviour as a result of the change in the life conditions of the society has led to cultural interactions with new and foreign elements being absorbed and adapted in the ritual. This has resulted in a shift in the emphasis and meaning of initiation, thus some people prefer not to speak of 'traditions' but *imikhuba* (customs). These threaten the social identity, with other identities posing a claim on society, have irresistible attractions especially for the contemporary youth, thus tribal identity is gradually fading. Christianity also poses a threat on the performance of the ritual causing the members of the society to see rituals as pagan practices (1976:280).

The seclusion period in the past used to be three months, but nowadays it takes only seven weeks. Traditionally, the initiation of 'boys' was aimed at producing men who were warriors - as that period in history was characterised by fighting - who provided counsel for the king, and who were responsible for their families and respected other people's wives.

The traditional way of thinking has shifted to seeing initiation as a way of transformation and incorporation of the boys into a group. Nevertheless, the tradition has managed to resist the influence of Western culture as it continued to exist as a rite through which the boy enters manhood. For an amaBhaca 'boy' to become a 'man', he has to participate in the male initiation ritual including seclusion and circumcision.

To date, many changes have taken place affecting the form of the male initiation ritual, but this does not alter the purpose of the ritual, which is to ensure that 'boys' become 'men' in the fullest sense of the word.

The maintenance of purity as a priority in this ritual is a thing of the past. The question, which I leave unanswered, must now be posed: "Does the lack of personal purity have an impact on the benefit of the ritual?"

Literacy has not succeeded yet in causing harm to the ritual as more and more students are attracted to the *amaphempe* (lodges). The incorporation of boys into the status of adulthood seems to be of great importance in their lives.

The colourful beadwork, the evocative songs and dances continue to feature in the tradition, and rhythm has a particular value in the tradition. Jousse (1990) maintained that meaning could be conveyed completely by movement of the body without the support of speech as the facial expressions, gestures and stance reflect effective but wordless ways of conveying messages. In the ceremonies, movements and gestures reflect jubilation in the society who welcome their heroes.

Vansina (1960:96) is of the opinion that "oral tradition is bound up with its use in the case of initiation ceremony". In this case, the practice serves the ritual performance and the formalized learning, so that particular messages, proverbs and the original traditions are unique to the ceremony.

According to Mayer (1971:16) initiation is supposed to contribute to the personality development in a quite intelligible physiological way, but some of the incidents that occur in the *amaphempe* (lodges) scare society. As our traditions remain undocumented, we lack references to turn to in times of need. But we need to remember that our beings are indeed the documentation of what we believe and practice in our traditions. It is true that the people with whom we share relationships are always a mirror reflecting our own beliefs and simultaneously we are mirrors reflecting their beliefs.

The wealth of knowledge in the minds of the old people in our society is continuously disappearing, without there being any written record to preserve ancient wisdom for future generations. Such knowledge and wisdom include how the traditional ritual circumcisions were safely conducted in the absence of western medicines. In the past, this information was transmitted orally from generation to generation, but such oral transmission of the tradition is threatened, ironically, by the increase in literacy, schooling and technical modernisation. A loss of culture is viewed as a loss to the world and to Africans in particular. KwaBhaca society, though not as affected as other societies by the fatalities associated with the male initiation ritual, is concerned about how the good health and strong tradition can be balanced so that those who are initiated are assured of safety during the process. Initiation is seen as a step to maturation and the claiming of their identity, but KwaBhaca society is threatened by a number of factors that may contribute to the death or serious injuries of the initiates in the 'bush'.

On his return, the *ikrwala* is a different person, and a change in the way he is treated at home occurs. The change of status is coupled with a change in behaviour: he shows and acquires respect and seeks to be of service to his community. These newly initiated men continue to be

monitored in life so as not to stray. The young initiated play a role in sustaining the ritual's purity and dignity by assuring that their juniors behave in accordance with rules set for initiates so that society outside the lodge see the tradition as a success and a point of pride with which they can identify

Can the safety of the initiates undergoing the tradition in the traditional way of incorporating the youth in the adult status be guaranteed? The ritual itself is over a century old and in it is involved the maintenance of purity, confession and sacrifices made to the ancestors. There is a need to unearth those traditions that informed our societies in the past so that we can speak in the future of an "African Africa" (Amadou Hampaté Bâ).

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## APPENDIX A

## Glossary of terms

Bhaca term	English gloss	Example of use
<i>umkwetha</i> (s) <i>abakhwetha</i> (pl)	initiates	The stage at which the initiates are covered in white ochre to indicate their contact with the ancestors.
<i>amabele</i>	porridge made of ground millet	
<i>amahamasa</i>	tins tied around the legs	These make a noise as they walk warning people of their approach
<i>amakhankatha</i>	guardians	These men are charged with the care of the initiates in the lodges.
<i>ikrwala</i> (s) <i>amakrwala</i> (pl)	newly initiated men	The stage at which the initiates are covered in red ochre to indicate their new status.
<i>amarhewu</i>	unfermented beer made from maize	
<i>bhaca</i>	hide oneself, to take shelter (Zulu word)	A reference to the period in history when the amaBhaca were fugitives from Shaka.
<i>ingcibi</i> (s) <i>ingcibi</i> (pl)	traditional surgeons	These practitioners are 'traditioned', not schooled.
<i>impis</i>	warriors (Zulu)	Collective term
<i>ingcubhe</i>	a ritual of the sacred fruit	At the time of harvest, a ritual is performed before the sacred fruit can be eaten or used.
<i>iphempe</i> (s) <i>amaphempe</i> (pl)	lodge	A hut built in the wilderness to accommodate the initiates during the period of seclusion. The hut is burned together with all the contents and utensils used during the initiation and seclusion, at the end of the period of seclusion.
<i>indzevu</i> (s) <i>iindzevu</i> (pl)	uncircumcised males	Such people will have the status of a boy not a man in KwaBhaca society.
<i>ikrwala</i> (s) <i>amakrwala</i> (pl)	newly initiated man	
<i>ixhwele</i>	Traditional healer	A healer who uses herbs for healing.
<i>izichwe</i>	a healing poultice ground from a root known traditionally for its fast healing powers	
<i>isikhwetha</i>	The secret language of initiates.	
<i>isishwala</i>	Porridge made of maize and boiling water	
<i>ityalo</i>	calabash	A dried gourd used to store and ferment milk.
<i>itidzwaba</i>	traditional form of dress made from skins	A form of female traditional dress made of animal skins.

<i>imikhuba</i>	customs	These are customary practices not acceptable in KwaBhaca society.
<i>inkundla</i>	the area that lies between the hut and the kraal	This area is considered a holy place where the ancestors are found.
<i>lingena gantsho</i>	a brave man without protrusions at the back of the head	
<i>thsefula</i>	AmaBhaca dialect	This dialect distinguishes the amaBhaca from other groups.
<i>ubudoda</i>	manhood	
<i>umdlanga</i>	spear	The spear used for the ritual circumcision.
<i>ukusoka</i>	ceremony where the initiate is presented with gifts -	In the past his grandfather would make gifts of spears, cattle, goats etc. Currently the gifts are purchased rather than made.
<i>ukutheza</i>	the collecting of wood with some taken to the chief and the rest to the kraal of <i>uSosuthu</i>	This is no longer practiced.
<i>ukwaluka</i>	circumcision	Ritual removal of the foreskin with a spear.
<i>umkhosi wokweshwama</i>	first fruit celebration festival	A Bhaca feast celebrated prior to the use of fresh fruit from the fields.
<i>umngcamo</i>	feast for the initiates before they go to the mountain	A feast calling on the ancestors to bless the initiands prior to the seclusion and circumcision.
<i>umojiso</i>	water	
<i>umojiso</i>	feast given to initiates seven days after the initiation ritual	A feast to celebrate the removal of dietary restrictions following the circumcision. Such restrictions include the drinking of water.
<i>umphumo</i>	welcoming feast given to the initiates when they return home from the mountain	A feast given to celebrate the new status of the newly initiated men when they rejoin their families and communities after seclusion and circumcision.
<i>uSosuthu</i>	host	The owner of the lodge where the initiates are secluded and circumcised.
<i>uyazitoga</i>	Appeasing of ancestors for blessing his stay in the <i>iphempe</i> (lodge)-	Family praises and other traditional forms of praise and worship are performed for the ancestors in thanks for the safe return of the initiate and for his new status as a man.
<i>uyasokwa</i>	gifts	These can either be made or bought.

## APPENDIX B

**Genealogy of the Chiefs of AmaBhaca**  
 (From Hammond-Tooke 1962:311)

